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Arms Control Aides Wary of Flexibility's Taint

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NEWS ANALYSIS

Once or twice a week, in the windowless situation room of the White House basement, the men who have become the Reagan administration's arms-control brain trust huddle around a large oblong table to ponder U.S. strategy and tactics. It is a group dominated by skeptics who generally agree that past arms-control agreements were gravely flawed, and who share an anxiety about the need to look tough to the Soviet Union.

And it is a group divided by well-masked personal animosities.

As one of the highest councils of government, these men officially form the Special Arms Control Policy Group (once known as SACPG, pronounced "sack-pig," it is now SAC-G, or "sack-gee").

Although the men of SAC-G are theoretical equals in shaping U.S. policy, some are more equal than others. Some, in fact, despite positions of prominence in the government, wield little influence and are fundamentally figureheads. And as with sensitive groups such as this in all administrations, the members closest to the president are the most powerful. It is in SAC-G that the rifts within the administration on the future of arms control should be most vigorously evident.

But in this group, devoid of any enthusiastic arms-control zealots, even the suspicion of flexibility in bargaining with the Soviets can taint a viceroy's standing among SAC-G's most rigid hard-liners, according to some officials.

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Overhanging the Reagan administrations deliberations on arms control is a new element introduced 2½ years ago when the president unveiled his Strategic Defense Initiative, the so-called "Star Wars" research program to try to find a way to destroy incoming nuclear missiles. Preserving Reagan's SDI dream of a technological Astrodome over the western world has become an acid test for loyalty within the administration.

"There's quite a taboo to be seen to be sympathetic toward any arrangement that might circumvent or subvert the president's idea of an [SDI] shield," one recently retired official said. "The taboo doesn't inhibit a lot of intelligent research and discussion within agencies. But it does inhibit a purposeful interagency discussion even on a transition [from the current dependency on offensive weapons to a strategy of both offense and defense]."

Given the sanctity of SDI, it may be understandable that one senior Defense Department official likens himself and his Pentagon colleagues to "Horatius at the bridge," battling others who want to "sell out" Reagan's dream.

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The Central Intelligence Agency representative at SAC-G recently has been assistant director Clare George, according to one source. George usually limits himself to technical analyses, leaving policy arguments to CIA Director William J. Casey, who takes his views directly to Reagan, as does Weinberger.

When they are in Washington, the three ambassadors to the Geneva talks take part in the SAC-G discussions. They are Max M. Kampelman, a longtime Democrat and Washington lawyer; John G. Tower, former chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and Maynard W. Glitman, a career Foreign Service officer who has served in the Pentagon and as a Nitze deputy. Sources said the trio is not particularly influential in making policy, although Kampelman and Tower show great prowess on Capitol Hill defending the policy.

The surprise to arms-control experts has been Tower, who reportedly pushed the strategic arms discussions forward while cultivating an easy, diplomatic rapport with the Soviets.

The product of the SAC-G deliberations, either new positions or instructions to the negotiators, goes to the National Security Council. In practice, however, final policy choices are usually made in a conclave of Weinberger, Shultz, Casey and McFarlane with Reagan.

But this group seems in no hurry. They are waiting for the Soviet Union to make the first bold step away from the current superpower stalemate.

Recent events have been revealing. Earlier this month several of Reagan's key aides, including members of SAC-G, were hinting at possible flexibility on the question of trading restrictions on SDI for substantial reductions of offensive forces. But in his news conference Tuesday night, Reagan ruled out such a bargain.

The next morning, however, some of the same individuals who had suggested Reagan's flexibility were insisting that the president's statements were not final, but rather a bargaining strategy to up the ante on SDI. At the Pentagon, on the other hand, there was considerable enthusiasm for the president's declarations.

It was not the first time that the Pentagon had the last word, and the last laugh—something that could happen again before the November summit.

Last July, when Reagan decided to adhere for the time being to the unratified SALT II arms-control agreement by dismantling a Poseidon submarine, making room under the SALT II limits for a new Trident sub, the Pentagon was assigned to do a new study of Soviet treaty violations and the military responses that should be taken by the United States.

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Perle controls the study, and it has taken on a broader scope. Perle's analysis will provide a Pentagon view of the nuclear balance and the projected threat of Soviet strategic offensive and defensive programs. These will be measured against presently planned U.S. military programs. Perle and his colleagues will propose what they consider appropriate responses to meet the Soviet threat.

Fliply named the RSVP study, for responses to Soviet violations policy, it will be ready before the original Nov. 15 due date, and thus well before the Nov. 19-20 Reagan-Gorbachev meeting, so it can be put "into the pre-summit mix," as one Pentagon official put it.

The report's sharp attack on Soviet policies and calls for new U.S. weaponry "will be the perfect send-off" for Reagan, the Pentagon official said. For State Department officials who want the pre-summit days to emphasize possible improvement in superpower relations, he added, "The study will be like a [obscenity] in the punchbowl."